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Browning and Meredith

Some Points of Similarity

By

MARY WINCHESTER ABBOTT

BOSTON

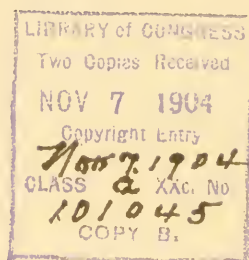
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TO
W. L. A.

Browning and Meredith

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THE aphorism, "Defend us from our friends; we can defend ourselves from our enemies," might well have originated with Browning and Meredith. "No," says Browning in one of his letters, "what I laughed at in my 'gentle audience' is a sad trick the real admirers have of admiring in the wrong place — enough to make an apostle swear. *That* does make me savage." And one can well imagine Meredith shaking hands on this, with a fellow-feeling, apostolic in its fervor. An enemy may be amusing, even inspiring; but a friend, a stupid friend, is — a test of character. What irony in the fact that Browning and Meredith of all men, the sworn foes of sentimentalism, should be the victims of the sentimentalists! It is easily explained: the fatal attraction of the strong for the weak, therein is the tragi-comedy of life. But to the sane admirers of an author, it is, nevertheless, a trial of the virtues. The clouds of perfumed vapor in which incense-burn-ing devotees have obscured their gods, make one gasp for the air of common sense. No wonder

the novice, to whom the gods themselves are unknown, is choked and driven back.

"Has Browning really written some poetry worth reading?" I was asked in all seriousness by a very intelligent person — otherwise intelligent, that is — and when I replied that I was inclined to think on the whole he had, I discovered my questioner's main idea of the poet to be that he was "ultra-religious," and a "fad with fashionable people."

"Do you like Browning?" asked a Browning lover of a friend.

"Yes, I really do," was the reply, "but I always hate to say so, so many fools like him." And when one hears Browning described as "just too lovely" and "awfully magnificent," or reads that Meredith's women are so wonderful, they really excel the creations of — Mr. Howells, one does feel like sinking into one's shoes in silence.

We turn with relief to the opposite camp, and are refreshed by such a delicious bit of savagery as the paper by William Watson, called *Fiction, Plethoric and Anæmic*. This is a feast for the comic muse. Most critics of Browning and Meredith fall into one of two classes: those who swear by them, and those who swear at them.

Mr. Watson belongs to the latter class, and his apoplectic wrath culminates on *The Egoist*. We quote :

“ ‘ But *The Egoist*,’ one hears some disciples of Mr. Meredith asking ; ‘ what of that unique masterpiece, *The Egoist*? ’ For that is the novel which seems to call forth more unlimited enthusiasm among the members of a certain esoteric cult than any other of our author’s works. That is pre-eminently the sacred book by which the faithful swear.” Here he quotes Stevenson at length, avowing that Stevenson’s enthusiastic admiration for *The Egoist* makes him distrust himself. “ Yet,” he adds, “ a critic can only record his own impressions, always taking care to test and revise them by such light as his own private study of the principles of literary art may lead him to ; and, speaking in sober literalness, with due attention to the force and value of words, my impression of *The Egoist* is that it is the most entirely wearisome book purporting to be a novel that I ever toiled through in my life. At the same time, here is a writer of Mr. Stevenson’s eminence whose delight in the book is manifestly real, and who, moreover, is able to give a lucid and telling account of the faith that is in him concerning it.

In the face of such evidence, an unbeliever does well to pause. Opinions and tastes may be questioned; delight in a thing cannot be argued with. Although Sir Willoughby Patterne, his insufferable selfishness, his colossal puppyism, his stilted phraseology, and his endless triflings with the hearts of the very unrealizable women who revolve around him, are to me simply soporific in their monotony and inanity, it is none the less clear that the book has qualities which fascinate some superior minds, and a reader who cannot enjoy them will do best to recognize the fact that he is not one of Mr. Meredith's elect, acknowledge his own limitedness, and say no more about it." Whereupon he proceeds to say several more pages about it. "For," he continues, "on the subject of literary style, even a person not pre-ordained from the beginning of things to appreciate Mr. Meredith's peculiar intellectuality may venture to say a word." (Evidently, when it comes to matters of style, Stevenson does not count.) Illustrations are given, and then: "No milder word than detestable can be applied to the preposterous style of which the foregoing sentences are examples, and vile as it is, it is surpassed in extremity of insufferableness by the

— what shall one call it? Intellectual coxcombry seems a blunt phrase, but is any courteous phrase available that will adequately describe the airs of superiority, the affectations of originality, the sham profundities, the counterfeit subtleties, the pseudo-oracularisms of this book? . . . Without constructive ability, without power to conceive and fashion forth realizable human creatures, without aptitude for natural evolution of incident, without the instinct for knowing what will keep his company awake, . . . Mr. Meredith can do anything better than he can tell a story.”

We feel that Mr. Watson's breath and vocabulary are well-nigh exhausted, and that to adequately express his feelings it would be necessary to resort to dashes. His article is a good illustration of much so-called criticism which consists mainly in a reiterated and round-about way of saying, “I don't like it, I Don't Like It, I DON'T LIKE IT.” I have not found an equally savage article on Browning; perhaps because Browning deals more with the tragic than the comic, and consequently does not hit the nerves of his unsympathetic readers as hard. *The Egoist* has been called “a drama of nerves,”

and it is just possible that the intense antipathy to that book shown by many, may be partly due to a consciousness by the nerves of a fact the mind refuses to accept, namely, that Willoughby, as Stevenson says, "is all of us."

What a wonderful thing this criticism is! How sublimely above all necessity for giving reasons! But it has one advantage: it is valuable training in self-reliance. One must think for oneself or go mad. Among the enemies of our authors, two positive conclusions appear. On the one hand, both are too intellectual. They are brilliant, brainy, clever; but lacking in heart, warmth, passion, imagination; too philosophical to be good poetry or good fiction. On the other hand, both are too emotional. They are intense, passionate, melodramatic; lacking restraint, discipline, reflection, solidity; too romantic to be safe guides in this wicked world. Compare the following: "Browning's love poems are completely lacking in warmth and passion." Browning's poems "not only portray passion, which is interesting, but they betray it, which is odious." "The heart throbs of his [Meredith's] men and women — how lightly considered!" "If it is not *Sturm und Drang*," with Meredith, "it is spasm and gasp."

Now, when one person swears that a bird is blue, and another takes oath it is brown, it is a fair hypothesis, is it not, that the bird may have both colors? And perhaps the truth at the root of these mutually annihilating criticisms is, that in both Browning and Meredith, there is at the same time more philosophy and more romance than most people know what to do with. Some people do not like philosophy, and some do not like romance, and many do not like them mixed. They want all sky or all earth, cloud-sentiment or dirt-realism. Their eyes can see but one color at a time; and if they catch sight of good brown earth, they say the author has no ideals; if they glimpse a space of blue sky, he lacks reality. But one thing is certain: what they do not see in an author is not there. To such, one is inclined to retort with Ben Karshook's wisdom:

“‘Friend, there is no reply!
 Certain a soul have I—
We may have none,’ he said.”

Of what use is it to say a book lacks heart and brain, to one who has read it with breathless interest, and to whom, after years, the characters stand out with the distinctness of finely chiseled

marble, and the vividness of a sunrise? Real criticism may exist, but in general we must agree with George Eliot that "it is one of the afflictions of authorship to know that the brains which should be used in understanding a book are wasted in discussing the hastiest misconceptions about it." "First catch your hare," says the old cook book; and the critic might profit by the suggestion: "First read your book." It is very easy to write fluently and cleverly about an author if you just don't trouble yourself about his idea; and most of the critics don't seem to have troubled one bit. One can only marvel at the vividness of their imagination when one does happen to have read the books under discussion. This is so preëminently true in regard to Browning and Meredith, that the only advice to be given to the novice is: "Let the critics alone. Taste for yourself. Unflavored by incense or gall, you may find the fruit quite different from your expectations." Only, of course, do not begin with *Sordello* or the first chapter of *Diana*.

It might be said that the ancient Greek ideal was Beauty; the mediæval Christian, Goodness; the modern scientific, Truth; though in all

times, the geniuses have been those who recognized the unity of these three. Browning and Meredith are enough the product of their times to start from truth. In this sense they are Realists. At the same time they are Idealists, because they believe that truth is beautiful; really believe it; it is not simply a theory with them, but a profound conviction. "Truth though the heavens fall," might be placed at the beginning of their works; "Truth and the heavens will not fall," at the end. "You need never be afraid of truth," they would say. "To those who have the courage to face the truth, life is always worth living, and it is sure to bring us in the end to something far more beautiful than any fancy we may have sacrificed for it." Art is to them the expression of life in its heart reality; truth penetrated deeply enough to find its beauty. To see Nature as she is and to make us see, is the poet's gift; not to paint muddy shallows or a bowl of gold-fish, and imagine it the ocean. Their primal thought is that you cannot transcend Nature. Imagination is simply interpretation. Fancies may be pretty, but they are not beautiful. Browning has expressed the ideal in the figure of an optic glass:

“Friend, did you need an optic glass
 Which were your choice, a lens to drape
 In ruby, emerald, chrysopras
 Each object, or reveal its shape
 Clear outlined, past escape,

The naked very thing, — so clear
 That, when you had the chance to gaze,
 You found its inmost self appear
 Through outer seeming-truth ablaze,
 Not falsehood’s fancy haze?”

Fancy is the one, imagination the other. Which gives the greater beauty a very small acquaintance with science will answer. And we would suggest here, that a little knowledge of science would clear away many of the apparent difficulties in Browning. This metaphor would probably be cited, by one unfamiliar with a microscope, as an instance of his obscurity. It is not musical, and we have quoted it simply because we have been unable, after repeated trials, to make a prose statement which as perfectly expressed the idea. The same thought, that Nature is best, is brought out in his little poem *Poetics*. Meredith has the same view of art. He says fiction is the “summary of actual life, the within and without of us.” “The art of the pen is to

rouse the inward vision." "True poets have the native sense of the divineness of what the world deems gross material substance." To him and to Browning we may apply what he says of two other poets: "They idealized upon life. The foundation of their types is real and in the quick, but they painted with spiritual strength which is the solid in art." They idealized on the real because they believed that *the beautiful is the deeply true*.

TRUTH FIRST. IT WILL LEAD TO BEAUTY. This belief is the basic principle of both Browning and Meredith; and, in the following pages, we shall try to show how it appears over and over again in different forms, in their Philosophy, and in their Art. In their philosophy, which we will consider first, it might be briefly stated in the formula: NATURE IS GOOD. Nature in her purest, deepest sense is the source of all that is beautiful. And now we ask, "What do they find in Nature?"

The answer is, "Activity and Joy: Fullness of Life." They are directly opposed to the passive, ascetic, mediæval idea. They throb with the joy of action. They seem to have drunk at the

fountain of youth. "Browning makes you feel it is impossible he should ever grow old," says a visitor at the Browning Italian home. "He has the voice and the laugh of youth," says a recent visitor to Meredith's home in Surrey. There is the same freshness in their books. With the complexity of the nineteenth century which pre-eminently they express, there is a kind of primitive force and simplicity of view. We feel they would have enjoyed living in the *Odyssey*. They are big enough to be good Pagans and good Christians too. They are Pagan enough to believe in the joy of living, even to make it a test of right living. "A strong since joyful man," is their hero. They would agree with Aristotle that the ideas of life and happiness are "so intimately combined as not to admit of separation;" that "life is energy," and happiness the perfection of our energies. Of *all* the energies they would emphatically add, sense as well as soul, for they are indivisible. Mr. Watson, in his amazing article, classes Meredith among the "anæmic" writers. To any one who has really read Meredith, this is inexpressibly droll. For Meredith's characters, like Browning's, are *thoroughbreds*. If there is one thing they have, it is blood; the

blood that leaps in the veins on a morning in the mountains, when one "draws that breath of the satisfied rapture charging the whole breast with thankfulness;" the blood that trembles with feeling, and thrills at heroic deeds and words. Both writers are scientific in their belief in the vital connection of clear blood and clear vision. Health is to them almost a virtue. There is nothing of the *fin de siècle* element about them. They would not be good subjects for Max Nordau!

"Oh! the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up
to rock,
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the
cool silver shock
Of the plunge in the pool's living water!"

Compare these lines with the description in *Diana* of a morning in the Alps, when "looking was living; walking was flying," and we feel that Meredith might have written the lines:

"How good is man's life the mere living! how fit to
employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses forever
in joy!"

The morning swim in *Lord Ormont* is another illustration of Meredith's appreciation of the

joy of mere living, when health and sky and sea and air make breathing a delight — the “strange pure ecstasy” of “simple being.” I suppose all favorite writers suggest certain atmospheres to their readers. To me Meredith and Browning give the vision of a horseback ride in the early morning, with “the year at the Spring,” the dew on the grass, and the lark in the heavens. “Prose can paint evening,” says *Diana*. “Poets are needed to sing the dawn. That is because prose is equal to melancholy stuff. Gladness requires the finer language.”

But, says some one, “Browning was a hopeless optimist because he was disgracefully healthy, and never had any trouble.” True, people in perfect health are seldom really pessimistic. But the fact that one’s view of life changes with one’s health is rather an argument for the optimist than the pessimist. If we admit health to be the normal thing, the more perfect the health, the more sane would we expect the view of life to be, other things being equal. Men of the wonderful vitality of Browning and Meredith would have a chance to know the wealth of enjoyment possible in the world, as less perfectly developed animals would not; and so might be expected *a priori* to

be the best guides to the possibilities of happiness. And optimism does not consist so much in expecting happiness for oneself as in believing in its possibility. The only real pessimist is he who does not believe happiness exists. As for trouble, those who say Browning had none, must forget the one great sorrow of his life; and if we admit that a simple great sorrow has not the tragic perplexity involved in it which shakes one's faith in the laws of the universe, this objection to Browning's philosophy cannot be urged against Meredith's, whose life presents a direct contrast. Varying as were the fortunes of these two men, they were both optimists in the truest sense: men, who with a sane frank view of life as it is, yet kept their vision of the ideal. Meredith's view of the Providence of things is not so unquestionably sure as Browning's; perhaps because his closer personal experience of the tragedy of life made its solution seem less simple. He does not attempt to "justify the ways of God to man" with Browning's certainty. It is his "gathered wisdom" that the fates are within us; that if we have courage, Nature is with us and we shall win in the end; but he does not try to trace all the steps in the evolution of good from evil. He is not

religious in the technical sense. You will hardly find the word "God" in his pages, while in Browning it is everywhere. Yet their ethics are practically the same: as one writer has expressed it, "the simple ethics of a faith in all heroic enterprises."

There is a good deal of the knight-errant about both these men; a scientific knight-errant, if you like — a knight-errant contemporary with Darwin, with an interest in evolution, and a belief in Nature instead of the Church — yet with all the romance of the best ideals of chivalry; with all the intensity of life of the chivalric age.

This intensity of life seems to be irritating to some people. According to Professor Santayana in his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, the joy of action in Browning marks him as a "barbarian." We quote a few sentences:

"Life to Browning is an adventure, not a discipline." "The zest of life becomes a cosmic emotion. We lump the whole together and cry 'Hurrah for the universe!'" "Browning's heroes would be right if the significance of life were to be measured by the intensity of the feelings it contained, and if intelligence were not the highest form of vitality." "With an unconscious mix-

ture of heathen instinct with Christian doctrine, Browning thinks of the other world as heaven, but of the life to be led there as the life of nature. No conception could be farther from his thought than the essential conception of any rational philosophy, namely, that feeling is to be treated as raw material for thought, and that the destiny of emotion is to pass into objects which shall contain all its value while losing all its formlessness." The whole chapter, called *The Poetry of Barbarism*, from which I have quoted, is most interesting; though to liken Browning to Whitman is, to put it mildly, rather droll. Most of the statements about Browning are true. Most of the conclusions drawn from them are false. He has hit upon Browning's fundamental virtues, and he calls them vices. His own philosophy makes it impossible for him to interpret the poet correctly. He is apparently a nineteenth century ascetic, so cultured that he considers emotions vulgar, or at best a kind of necessary evil, out of which good may come by the discipline of transcending them; through which discipline we may enter into the bliss of the life of contemplation. This is ascetic. It is mediæval. It is Dantesque without the grandeur of Dante. Browning believes in emo-

tion ; that it has value in itself. If this is to be a "barbarian" he certainly is one, and so is Meredith, and so are all psychologists who tell you that the very idea of value is dependent on feeling. Take all feeling from a subject and you have left a colorless fact ; the very idea of good or evil is gone.

What Professor Santayana really objects to in Browning is that he is not a mediævalist ; he does not believe that Nature is "desperately wicked." To the mediæval idealist, goodness was something outside of and above Nature. It was attained only in some future state, by the sacrifice in this life of the natural feelings, and particularly of the senses. This life was of value only as a preparation for the future. Active joy in living savored too much of the earthly, the fleshly, the human. Browning and Meredith believe in the unity of earth and heaven ; of flesh and spirit ; of human and divine. A point they particularly combat, because to them it is the ground of so much false sentiment and false ethics, is the idea, fostered by much Christian theology, that the senses are degrading. They believe that the senses, like everything else, are degrading or uplifting according to their use ; that any other view

leads to hypocrisy and grossness. They believe that only to the gross of nature are the senses anything but pure and good ; and that to the pure in heart they are wings rather than weights to the spirit. What they most strenuously fight is the unnatural separation of things in themselves united. What they most strongly emphasize, in contrast to the mediæval idea, is the necessity of the harmonious working of *all* the energies of man's nature, and the wonderful value of the *present*. These two beliefs are inseparable corollaries of the belief that Nature is good. If any energy of Nature is bad, then the present is bad ; for the most strenuous ascetic is forced to admit the impossibility of living an entirely intellectual life on earth. We cannot separate thought and feeling and action, the various energies of man's nature, and have *life* left, any more than we can separate bark and leaves and sap of a tree. But if all energies of Nature are good, then the present is just as good a time as any in which to use them. In truth it is the only time ; for when we reach the future, it has become the present. Therefore, if we do not live *now*, we shall never live at all. This is their belief. They include the mediæval idea by transcending it. They believe in the

future and in discipline; but they believe that the best and only preparation for the future is the best and fullest use of the present; and that the best discipline is that of *control* rather than of sacrifice. They believe in thought and in the life of the spirit; but they believe that the feelings and senses are absolutely necessary to the fullest development of these, and are also of value in themselves. They believe that goodness is not something outside of and above Nature, but *the working out of the truth of Nature to the beauty and joy of life*.

This is the basis of their optimism: that all things are good if rightly used, and so each moment may bring joy. Therefore, "No regrets. They unman the heart we want for the morrow." No fears. Hope means sanity of mind.

"A life to live — and such a life! a world
To learn, one's lifetime in, — and such a world!
How did the foolish ever pass for wise
By calling life a burden, man a fly?"

This optimism, however, is to be sharply distinguished from the optimism of the sentimentalists, who think the world is all beautiful because they close their eyes to everything they do not like. Browning and Meredith looked at what

was before them, not over it nor under it; and they saw the dark side of life. Sounding the depths, they reached the heights.

“Only by looking low ere looking high,
Comes penetration of the mystery”

says Browning; and Meredith likens those who see only what they wish to see, to people who “escape colds by wrapping in comforters instead of trusting to the spin of the blood.” He believes that “muscular principles are sown only in the world, and on the whole, with all their errors, the worldly men are the truest as well as the bravest of men.” Both authors are the deadly foes of sentimentalism in all its ever-changing forms. The lovers in *The Statue and the Bust* are sentimentalists. So is Nevil Beauchamp. Beauchamp is a good illustration of the one thing lacking, without which the tongues of men and of angels avail nothing with Meredith, namely, STRENGTH. He has many lovable qualities, but in the critical point which makes the difference between an average man and a hero, he fails. The dramatic scene between Renée and Nevil in London is a masterpiece of subtle characterization, in the way it shows cowardly egotism

masquerading as morality and self-sacrifice. Beauchamp does what the moral world around him approves, and he is man enough to be ashamed of himself for doing it. He knows that he has failed in his ordeal. That he has been called Meredith's "ideal hero" is a comment on the penetration of the critics, and is as droll as the assumption that Adrian Harley, in *Richard Feverel*, is "Meredith himself." Adrian is clever, and amusing at times. When his cousin reminds him that "the boys' fate is being decided now," and he drawls out, "So is everybody's, my dear Austin," we laugh. But Adrian has lived too much in the "muddy shallows" of life to keep his wit clear; and Meredith is quite as scornful of those who think they know life because they know its mud, as he is of the sentimentalists. The "comic spirit" hovers equally over the Baronet, who has brought up his son on a "system" which is to make him perfect by keeping him from all knowledge of evil, and over Adrian, who opposes the system with the wild oats theory. And though the latter is useful in exposing the fallacy of the Baronet's position, the Baronet has the last word in the calm reply that he thinks "the third generation of wild oats would be a pretty

thin crop." Balance of head and heart is what both authors demand. Their ethical theory might be summed up in the statement that it takes brains to be good, and the bad man is a fool. The positively bad man is not so much their quarry as the negatively good. In their eyes the latter does more harm. The man who will not see things as they are, whether blinded by egotism or convention, that man they relentlessly hunt down; that man is the sentimentalist.

We have said that the basis of our authors' Philosophy is the belief that NATURE IS GOOD. Let us now see how it is worked out in their Art. In their Plot it takes the form of a belief in Moral Law; a law as inexorable as the most terrible God; as inexorable as the laws of physics and biology, for its foundation is the same. It is natural law carried out in all its intricacies. Follow truth, and beauty will follow you, is its formula. Forsake truth, and Nemesis, tragic or comic, will overtake you. There is absolutely no escape. "We are marked to get back what we give," says Meredith, "even from what we call inanimate Nature."

A valuable thing about this psychological neme-

sis, which we find among the Pagans, and which has a bracing advantage over much Christian theology, is that it demands intellectual clarity as well as moral probity. Brains and more brains is the only effective weapon against sentimentalism. To mean well is no excuse in the realm of Nature's law. "Ignorance is not innocence, but sin," says Browning in *The Inn Album*. Violate a law of health and you suffer, whether it was done in ignorance or in knowledge. The same is true in the moral realm, and the only ethical training which fits one for life is that which teaches this truth.

"Why are the innocent tempted to ruin, and the darker natures allowed to escape?" says Meredith. "Any street-boy could have told her of the virtue in quick wits. But her unexercised reflectiveness was on the high-road of accepted doctrines, with their chorus of the moans of gossip for supernatural intervention to give us justice. She had not learned that those innocent, pushed by an excessive love of pleasure, are for the term lower in the scale than their wary darker cousins, and must come to the diviner light of intelligence through suffering."

The moral value of a clear vision of life, no one

will probably deny. From Socrates down, it has been admitted in various degrees. We may be good enough to get to the Christian heaven without brains, but we will not make much of a heaven on earth, and our friends may be glad to have us go to a place more fitted for us. In a world where law is paramount, you must *know* the truth, that it may make you free. From a scientific point of view, the moral and intellectual virtues have decidedly a way of getting mixed. The consciousness of this real unity is often found among simple common-sense people who have no idea of being scientific. "They did not know any better," says one. "But they *ought* to have known better," is the sturdy reply. Most of the tragedy of life does not come from wilful wrongdoing. Self-deception and stupidity are accountable for quite as much or more. On the other hand, intellectual clarity makes certain faults impossible. Really intellectual people are never prigs nor prudes. Meredith would add, that really witty people cannot be vile, since "the well of true wit is truth itself." Spiritual clarity and moral vileness cannot live long together; for truth is one, and its law is unfailing.

Depart from truth but by a hair's breadth, and

the comic imps will have you with their lurking smile, as in *The Egoist* and *Evan Harrington*; or the tragic fates with their relentless frown, as in *The Return of the Druses*, and *The Ring and the Book*. The way in which a character is hunted down in these writers is worthy of the Greeks. It shows a tremendous grasp of human life. Some one has said that only by comparing Meredith with the Greeks can we understand him; for with him, as with them, it is the main outlines which count first. He is strong in architectonics. Perfection of detail may be wanting at times. His work may be like "a colossal sphinx, not fully extricated from the desert sands"; yet the strength and surety of design is there. Both he and Browning have a task much less simple than the Greeks. To have been as great artists they must have been greater. They portray the complexity of modern life. They voice its unrest. Yet beneath it there is a great calm, born of their fundamental belief that *truth leads to beauty, and that every form of untruth has its unfailing nemesis*.

But the nemesis is always a psychological nemesis. The fate is in Character rather than in events. We do not have an Oedipus or a Mac-

beth cast down from temporal heights by his faults. The outward state of the hero often remains much the same. Yet we do not feel the nemesis the less, but even more.

“You will find all you seek and perish so,”

says Michel to Paracelsus; and is not that the saddest of all dooms? — a doom which, though brought about through action, yet begins and ends in character. “Action in character, rather than character in Action,” is what we find in both Browning and Meredith. The development of the soul is the one thing worth study, according to Browning; and Meredith declares his subject-matter to be the “soul wind-beaten but ascending.” Both writers are subjective in that they portray thoughts and feelings, objective in that they portray them in others. Their method is different according to the different art-forms they use. Browning has the lyric concentration; Meredith the epic breadth. Meredith works much in comedy; Browning chiefly in tragedy. Both are essentially dramatic. Their subject is

MEN AND WOMEN.

They are deep lovers of nature. They bring her to us with a vivid freshness which is en-

chanting. They have *lived* with her. To treat this side of their work with any degree of justice would require a paper by itself. Yet nature is with them always a background for character. So with plot and style. They are means of developing character. Men and Women are their first interest; and men and women in some particular situation which is their ordeal.

And what are their men and women like? Just what we should expect from their philosophy. They have the beauty of truth; they have strength. That is the first thing. Not the sham strength, which is selfish harshness with a fine name, but *the true strength, which has infinite gentleness at the core*. Their ideal hero has balance of brain and heart; the complexity of our time with a fundamental simplicity of nature; complexity of intellectual power and singleness of devotion; depth of thought and intensity of feeling. Typical characters are Caponsacchi and Dartrey Fenellan, knight-errants both. Loyalty is the virtue *par excellence*. Whatever else their heroes are, they are men you can depend on every time. "I like him," says the boy Cross-jay of Vernon Whitford, "because he is always the same, and your're not positive about some

people. If you look on at cricket, in comes a safe man for ten runs. He may get more, and he never gets less,—that's just my feeling about Mr. Whitford." Negative virtues and people without backbone they have small patience with. Wilfred Pole, the sentimentalist, is nailed in a sentence: "He could pledge himself to eternity, but he shrank from being bound to eleven o'clock on the morrow morning."

If we could choose but two words to characterize our authors' heroes, they would be Strength and Purity. But the strength is never harsh, and the purity is never weak. It is not the purity of innocence, but a kind of high-mindedness and depth of view which makes anything low and mean impossible. It is the purity of fire, not of snow. It is purity in the sense that Meredith uses it when he says of a play, "It is deeply conceived, in the first place, and therefore it cannot be impure."

Strength means courage and sincerity. "Her courage is of a kind that may knit up every other virtue worth having," says the Princess Ottilia of Janet in *Harry Richmond*. "So I envy and admire, even if I have to blame her; for I know that this possession of hers would bear the ordeal of fire."

"One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,"

is Browning's hero always.

The test of courage is often sincerity. "A complete exposure of past meanness is the deed of present courage certain of its reward without as well as within," says Meredith; and Browning expresses the same thought:

"So absolutely good is truth, truth never hurts
The teller, whose worst crime gets somehow grace,
avowed."

As the root of character is strength, so is purity the crown. As strength implies courage and sincerity, so purity implies gentleness and magnanimity. "It should be a spotless world which is thus ruthless," says Meredith in *Diana of the Crossways*. "But were the world impeccable it would behave more generously. The world is ruthless, dear friends, because the world is hypocrite. The world cannot afford to be magnanimous, or even just." The man who is always pulling the mote out of his brother's eye is pretty sure to have a beam in his own. It is only those who fear for themselves who must needs be harsh to others. The truly great and good are generous and kind.

"The great man knows the power of gentleness."

The true hero is Browning's Hercules, whose very voice brought strength and help:

"The irresistible sound wholesome heart
O' the hero, —
This drove back, dried up sorrow at its source.
How could it brave the happy weary laugh
Of who had bantered sorrow!"

"Heracles —
Had flung into the presence, frank and free,
Out from the labor into the repose,
Ere out again and over head and ears
I' the heart of labor, all for love of men;
Making the most of the minute that the soul
And body, strained to height a minute since,
Might lie relaxed in joy this breathing space,
For man's sake more than ever."

Such are Browning's and Meredith's heroes: strong, great of heart, using their strength for love of mankind, and joyful in so doing. Here again we strike the note of joy as the sign of health in man and God:

"Men being mortal should think mortal-like
Since to your sullen, brow-contracting sort,
All of them, — so I lay down law at least, —
Life is not truly life, but misery."

“I think this is the authentic sign and seal
 Of godship, that it ever waxes glad
 And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts
 Into a rage to suffer for mankind.”

Such gladness is possible only to those who in a deep sense are pure in heart. They have a transparent simplicity of nature which “drinks sunlight,” and transforms all into its own purity and strength.

And what is true of their heroes is true of their heroines. It could hardly be otherwise from their point of view. But their point of view differs so widely from the majority of writers, that their women deserve separate consideration. They are, indeed, one of their first claims to greatness. “Browning,” says one writer, “had no use for either of the pet modern shibboleths, ‘the innate superiority of man or the innate superiority of women.’” They lead to superficial intelligence and sentimental morality. Meredith agrees with the boy Richard that “girls are very much like boys,” and with the Baronet that the “subsequent immense distinction is one of education.” If balance of head and heart is a striking characteristic of the heroes of our authors, it is still more noticeable in their heroines, since

less often found — in books. It is taken for granted in Browning; developed at length in Meredith. Both writers have a deep-seated conviction that women have brains, when they are allowed to use them; and that with brains they are neither angels nor devils, as is the tradition in much literature, but suffering human souls like men; in the world, neither throned above it, nor trodden under foot. They believe in the "heroical feminine," in women who are "men's mates," in whom the "gift of strength" is "above ornamental whiteness." But strength comes only through knowledge; therefore give them knowledge, "the right use of the brain." Brains and more brains in women, or rather the right to use them, is the only safeguard for society, according to Meredith. Cloisteral seclusion for women means sentimentalism for the weak, recklessness for the strong. Only through knowledge comes poise. Knowledge gives courage, and courage and frankness are as much a part of their ideal woman as tenderness and sympathy. They do not divide the virtues into masculine and feminine — the sterner ones for the men, the gentler for the women.

"Get you something of our purity
And we will of your strength"

say the *Fair Ladies in Revolt*. "She is brave of heart," is the praise given to Sandra Belloni. "All her life she had been frank." "I like — what do I like? — his kindness," says Sandra of Merthyr Powys. "He has a heart, as they call it. Whatever it is, it's as strong as a cable. He is a knight of the antique," says Lady Charlotte. They do not seem to think that hearts are any more the exclusive property of women than brains are of men. Meredith expresses the ideal in the *Tragic Comedians*: "You meet now and then men who have the woman in them without being womanized; they are the pick of men. And the choicest of women are those who yield not a feather of their womanliness for some amount of man-like strength." The tree and vine symbolism would not suit them. Their men and women are rather like the broadsword of Richard and the scimitar of Saladin, which were equally effective in battle, though one could cut through an iron mace and the other a cushion of down.

If Thackeray had only had a conception of this, his women would not have been so distressingly good, or so fatally clever. What a character Meredith would have made of Beatrice Esmond!

I have always had a feeling that Thackeray really liked brains in women, but had a theoretical objection to them. He gets out of patience a dozen times with Amelia, and has to remind himself over and over again that she is good and therefore must be lovable, in order to keep her his heroine at all. As a naïve critic put it: "Oh, I like Becky best. Of course Becky was bad and Amelia was good. But then it always seemed to me Amelia just *happened* to be good. She didn't *decide* to be." Meredith's women and Browning's decide to be whatever they are. "She was pure of will," says Meredith of one of his heroines, "fire, not ice."

One thing more — and this is, of course, the *sine qua non* of heroines, — they are fascinating. We defy the most hard-headed opponent of brains in women not to come under the spell of Clara or Diana, Nesta or Sandra, Otillia or Renée; Pompilia, Anael, Eulalia, the Duchess, or some other of the group. These women are intellectual, even "brainy." They are strong of will, and yet — the "yet" is in deference to the philistine — they are delightfully feminine. Perhaps this little poem of Meredith's best sums up the complex charm of their personality:

“She can be as wise as we,
And wiser when she wishes;
She can knit with cunning wit,
And dress the homely dishes.
She can flourish staff or pen,
And deal a wound that lingers;
She can talk the talk of men,
And touch with thrilling fingers.

“Match her ye across the sea,
Natures fond and fiery;
Ye who zest the turtle’s nest
With the eagle’s eyrie.
Soft and loving in her soul,
Swift and lofty soaring;
Mixing with its dove-like dole
Passionate adoring.

“Such as she who’ll match with me,
In flying or pursuing;
Subtle wiles are in her smiles
To set the world a-wooing.
She is steadfast as a star,
And yet the maddest maiden;
She can wage a gallant war,
And give the peace of Eden.”

This is the type, and, when we really see it, we do not wonder that it inspires the finest chivalry in men. Browning and Meredith are unlike any other writers we know, in that they portray at the

same time the strongest women and the knightliest men.

This combination of strength and sweetness, great brain power and passionate feeling in both men and women, makes their characters decidedly exceptional. In one sense, of course — at least if Aristotle be true — all great dramatic characters are exceptional. Some trait, intensified, places them above or below the average. In the former case we have the basis for tragedy; in the latter for comedy. Yet we feel that the characters of Browning and Meredith are exceptional in a sense that Sophocles' and Shakespeare's are not. Oedipus, Lear, Macbeth, serve perfectly as tragic heroes in their respective plots; but would they be particularly interesting people to meet? Personally I think not. Are they for this reason more typical? Perhaps. We must remember that we said in Browning and Meredith the main interest is in character, while in the drama proper it is in action. Perhaps "character in action" is more suitable for portraying a type of what is, and "action in character" for portraying the exception, or what should be, "characters superior but true," to quote Bourget. If the chief dramatic interest is in the course of

events, it is only necessary that the characters be raised above the average in one particular point, to give a place of attack, a revolving point for the plot. If the interest is in the soul-development, the more unusual points, the more interesting, within limits, is the character. In *Macbeth* and *Lear* and *Othello* we have an excess of one emotion: ambition, vanity, jealousy. There is nothing exceptional about the intellect of these men. In *Richard III* and *Hamlet*, on the other hand, the excess of intellect is the trouble. In *Paracelsus*, *Djabal*, *Anael*, *Pompilia*, *Caponsacchi*, *Carinthia*, *Diana*, *Redworth*, *Alvan*, *Sandra*, and the rest, the interest is in the unusual combination of intellect and feeling, struggling to develop itself. Such characters need exceptional circumstances to bring them out, and it is almost always true that we find them in some crucial position.

As the development of the individual is the chief concern of both authors, and most conventional laws are framed to subordinate the individual to society, their characters are often in rebellion against established forms. This is a ground of objection to some good people; the sort of people who will not read George Eliot's books because they do not approve of her char-

acter! One has the picture of a pigmy standing on a giant's toe, shaking its fist at him and shouting, "You bad, wicked man! I will trample on you." They would describe *The Ring and the Book* as "an elaborate apology for a young wife who ran away from her aged husband with a priest;" and they would agree with Professor Santayana that "the man in the gondola may well say he can die; there is nothing else he can properly do." To fit our authors to philistine ethics might give us trouble sometimes, but they are in truth profoundly moral; as moral as James' chapter on *Habit*; as spiritual as truth itself. If the results of conventions as they are were satisfactory, there would be reason in the philistine cry, "Let well enough alone." But *as things are*, the question of the individual versus society is certainly an open one. The *first* way to help society is to develop oneself. "Live for self and others," says the scientist.

"To thine own self be true.

Thou canst not then be false to any man,"

says the poet. To give we must have something to give; and progress toward beauty and idealism comes from a greatness of spirit that dares go

afresh to Nature for fundamental principles, instead of submitting to rules of authority simply because they are established. It is this that gives a refreshing quality to Browning and Meredith. To read them is like going from the hot-house atmosphere of a drawing-room into the pure air of nature. It is a "broad plain open to boundless heaven," after the prison-walls of conventionality. The same principle of TRUTH which we found at the base of their writing, comes out here: the desire to search to the foundation of things, and seek the real right and wrong, rather than accept the conventional standards which may or may not be right. Their ideal characters have the finest flower of moral courage. They are not afraid to do right because it *looks* wrong. There is a pitfall here. "Yes, you have courage," says Weyburn to Aminta, "and that comes of a great heart, and therein lies the danger." The only safety is in a clearness of vision which distinguishes between what is *above* convention, and what is *below* it. The trouble is most people do not make this distinction. Perhaps it is safer for them not to try. If one is color blind, it is better to keep to black and white. Emerson says: "The populace think that your

rejection of popular standards is the rejection of all standards; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes. But the law of consciousness abides. And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others. If anyone imagine that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day." No one has discriminated more surely between the above and below of conventionalities than Browning and Meredith. The question of the individual and society may be an open one; but from the individual point of view, there can be no question of the purity of their types. They deal with the soul "wind-beaten," but always *ascending*.

As we have the exceptional characters in exceptional circumstances, so we have them developed through an exceptional Style. In their style, as in their philosophy, our authors' first aim is truth rather than beauty. They strike at the meaning of things, pierce to the heart,

"spring imagination with a word." They endeavor to express not only thought but the emotion which goes with thought; that which on the stage would be expressed by gesture; the inner workings of the spirit. As Meredith says of one of his characters, "She had not uttered word, she had shed meanings." The difficulty of this method makes success in details very uncertain; but when it does succeed, it gives peculiar beauty; a vibrant atmosphere which expresses feeling as well as thought, in something the manner of music. One is reminded of Wagner and his belief in the relation of the two arts. Some of the figures of speech which have been seized for the sarcasm of the critics, when one understands the emotional state of mind they are intended to portray, are seen to be strokes of art. Taken literally, the description of Pompilia's approach might be foolishness to the philistine, who did not appreciate the state of mind which caused it:

"till at last

Began a whiteness in the distance, waxed
Whiter and whiter, near grew and more near,
Till it was she; then did Pompilia come;
The white I saw shine through her was her soul's
Certainly, for the body was one black,
Black from head down to foot."

So in Meredith, "The gulf of a caress hove in sight like an enormous billow. She stooped to a buttercup. The wave passed by." This exactly expresses Clara's state of mind, and her attitude toward the lover's rights of the man she was beginning to loathe. "She seized her languor like a curling snake" is a perfect expression of her psychological condition. And the psychology of smiles is in the two following descriptions: Pompilia's of Guido,

"And when he took my hand and made a smile,"

and Caponsacchi's of Pompilia,

"How when the page of the 'Summa' preached its
best

Her smile kept glowing out of it."

But the style of these writers is so closely bound up with their general psychological attitude, that before we can understand it, it is perhaps necessary to get at the heart of their thought. Like some people,

"You must love them ere to you
They will seem worthy of your love,"

and it is perhaps also true that, like some people, they have the faculty of almost making us love

them for their faults. One real glimpse into them is such an illumination that every part is transfigured. John Jay Chapman says: "The world is so cleanly divided into people who do and do not care for Browning. The public which loves him is made up of people who have been through certain spiritual experiences, to which he is the antidote. To some he is a strong, rare, and precious elixir, which nothing else will replace. To others, who do not need him, he is a boisterous and eccentric person — a Heracles in the house of mourning." All this is quite as true of Meredith, and my experience would lead me not to try to make anyone like these authors. One friend who tried Meredith told me she really couldn't read Choctaw; another that he liked some things of Browning's when he had blasted out a small part of their meaning. Another was shocked by *Lord Ormont*, and would read no further. She sent me the following clipping: "An American traveler asked an English bookseller whether he had a sixpenny Meredith. 'Oh dear, no, miss,' the man replied, protestingly, 'Meredith's altogether too choky to go into sixpenny, miss, and that *Egoist's* the chokiest of them all.'" The comment was added:

“ ‘ Choky ’ in connection with Meredith seems an inspired utterance.” Yet “ choky ” can hardly be applied to the following:

“ The tide of color has ebbed from the upper sky. In the West the sea of sunken fire draws back ; and the stars leap forth and tremble, and retire before the advancing moon, who slips the silver train of clouds from her shoulders, and, with her foot upon the pine-tops, surveys heaven.” Or to these: “ The shadow of the cypress was lessening on the lake. The moon was climbing high. As Richard rowed the boat, Lucy sang to him softly. She sang to him a bit of one of those old Gregorian chants, that, wherever you may hear them, seem to build up cathedral walls about you. The young man dropped the sculls. The strange, solemn notes gave a religious tone to his love, and wafted him into the knightly ages and the reverential heart of chivalry.”

Nor are these lines particularly “ obscure ” or “ rough ”:

“ May’s warm, slow, yellow, moonlit summer nights,
Gone are they, but I have them in my soul.”

“ She must be grown, with her blue eyes upturned
As if life were one long and sweet surprise.”

We do not deny that obscurity is a fault of both these writers at times. But when we speak of obscurity, we must remember that even the elect are not free from it. I will venture to explain any of Browning's poems (except *Sordello* and *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*) to anyone who will explain all of Shakespeare's sonnets to me. This is not saying that on the whole Browning is not more obscure than Shakespeare. But neither with Browning nor Meredith is the obscurity an obscurity of thought. They know what they mean always, but language finds difficulty in expressing it at times. Life is to them so rich, so full of meaning, that in endeavoring to express it in its fullness, they sometimes burst the bounds of art, as commonly accepted. Their work is like a great, unfinished cathedral, grand in design, exquisitely worked out in parts, but open to the outer world. It has not the perfect cathedral air of Dante's work. But it has a charm of its own, and we begin to wonder if there was not "method in the madness" of the builder. The winds blow through it; the sunlight and moonlight, the blue sky and the stars look in, and the beauty of art is penetrated with the freshness of nature.

There is one point so fundamental in our authors that we have not ventured to treat it in the compass of this paper; yet it is the touchstone of their work — their treatment of the passion of Love. All the critics without exception, bitterest enemies and staunchest friends, unite in praising the love scene between Richard and Lucy, in *Richard Feverel*, as one of the most beautiful in all literature; and it would not be difficult to find passages in Browning's love poems on which people could be equally unanimous.

"By no one," says one writer, "has love been depicted with at once a profounder passion, a more absolute purity of touch, than by our author. Mr. Meredith has the gift of the poets. There is more than one novelist of eminence who stiffens, as it were, into self-consciousness at the mere approach of love-making. He has the sense of intrusion, perhaps the sense of absurdity; or in the effort to overcome his shyness, he strains his effects and touches a false note. This self-consciousness, either of diffidence or audacity, is apt to communicate itself to the reader. He feels intrusive in his turn; he finds an indiscretion in assisting at a scene where he is made to feel himself an unwelcome third. Hence, the novels in

which the love scenes, when they are given, can be read with pleasure, might almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. But Mr. Meredith has the higher gift. His vision of the moment is too sure for self-consciousness, his conception of it too pure and exquisite, too removed from common things, to raise any emotion in the reader commoner than itself. He no more feels intrusive than he would feel it intrusive to walk in a garden among flowers glowing at each other in the evening light."

All this is true of both Meredith and Browning. Love is to them the promise of immortality; the deepest and purest thing in nature. All we have found true in their philosophy and their art we may see reflected in miniature, as it were, in their treatment of love. "By our manner of loving we are known," says Meredith; and the truth of the words may be seen in these writers.

Whatever else our authors were they were great-hearted men, and great imaginative thinkers; great artists in design if not always in detail. In their faults, as in their virtues, they are much alike. Their main fault is an overplus of Titanic energy, not perfectly moulded into art

form — an exceptional fault, at times suggestive and inspiring. Life is to them more than art. Truth is their first thought. Nature is their guide.

In their philosophy they are lovers of the Truth which is Beauty.

In their art they are Realists and Idealists.

In their life they were Englishmen who loved Italy.

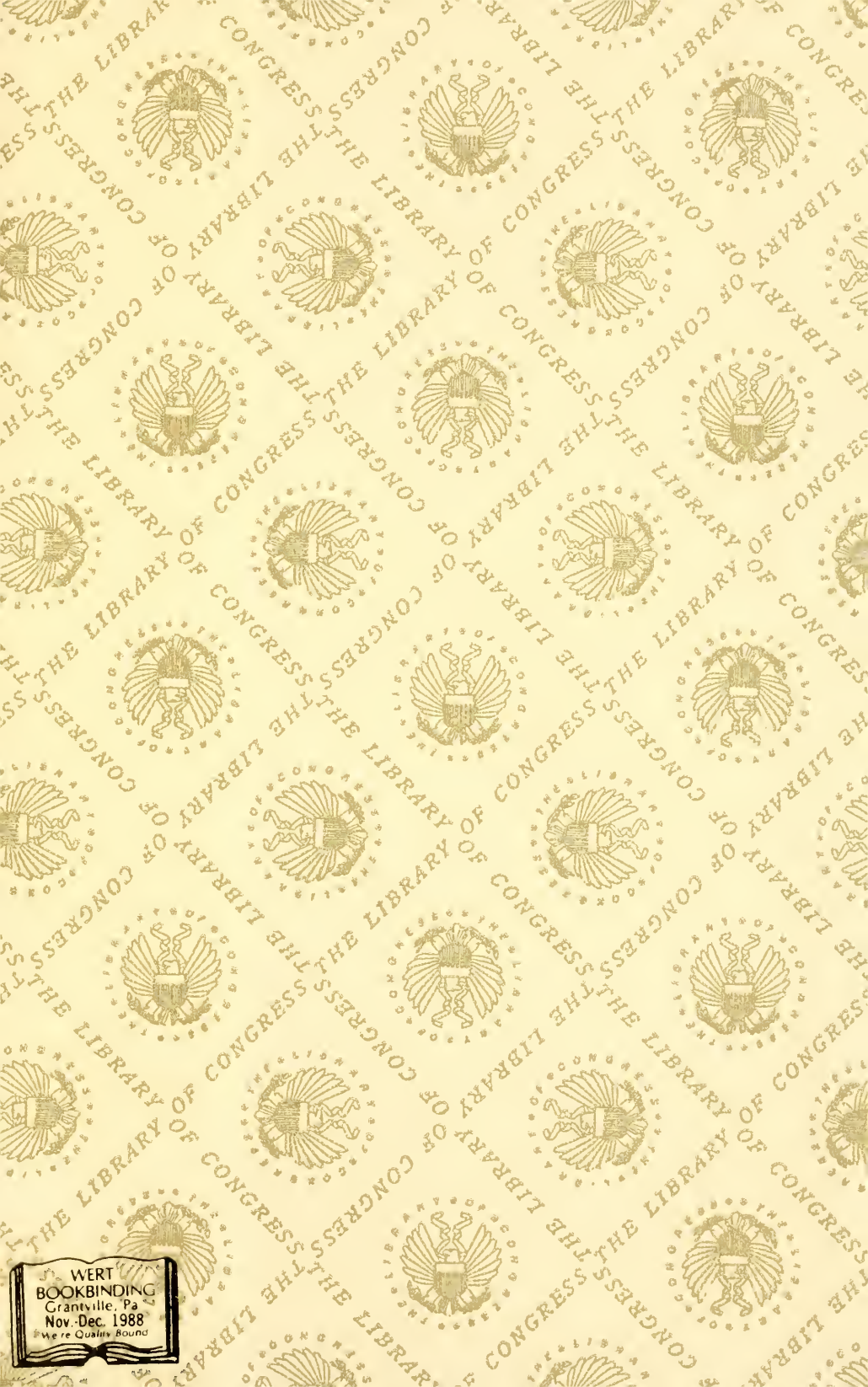
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